

## Clerks ratify Southland market pact

**Union approval of the contract with the chains averts a labor stoppage like the one in 2003-04 that lasted 141 days.**

By Richard Verrier and Jerry Hirsch, Times Staff Writers  
July 23, 2007

Axcel Flores was upbeat as he joined thousands of co-workers from Vons, Ralphs and Albertsons supermarkets in voting for a new labor contract that won approval Sunday.

"I'm very happy," said Flores, a supervisor at a Vons in Studio City, where he has worked for 12 years. "We got a pay raise, we got to keep our benefits and we don't have to go on strike."

"You can't ask for anything else," he said. Clutching his 9-month-old son Miguel in one hand and a crumpled copy of the union agreement in the other, he cast his vote in Burbank — one of 25 voting spots throughout the Southland.

The enthusiasm was widespread Saturday and Sunday as grocery workers across Southern California voted to ratify the agreement that ended protracted contract talks with the region's largest supermarket chains.

The four-year contract would give workers their first scheduled raises since 2002.

Although vote tallies were not available Sunday night, the contract covering members of the United Food and Commercial Workers was "overwhelmingly ratified" said union spokeswoman Sandra M. Lloyd-Jones.

"I expect a better than 90% acceptance," said Rick Icaza, president of UFCW Local 770 in Los Angeles. "I'm ecstatic."

Supermarket executives were just as positive.

"I applaud the UFCW International Union, the seven Southern California UFCW locals and our employer bargaining partners for coming to agreement on a contract that benefits our employees, customers and company," said Steve Burd, chief executive of Safeway Inc., owner of the Vons and Pavilions grocery chains.

"This new agreement will provide employees with the best wages, benefits and working conditions in the Southern California retail market, while making certain Vons has the tools to thrive in a highly competitive environment."

All three employers issued the following statement: "We are proud to have negotiated a new contract that continues to provide our employees with a comprehensive wage and

benefits package, as well as allows our companies to remain competitive in Southern California."

For shoppers, the agreement capped weeks of angst. "For consumers, no strike is a good thing," said Cheryl Bhence, who shops for her family of four at a Ralphs in Cypress.

Bhence, however, said she was concerned that the supermarket could raise prices to pay for the new union contract.

The agreement covers 65,000 union members who work at 785 Albertsons, Ralphs and Vons stores from San Diego to Bakersfield.

The agreement reached Tuesday made up some of the ground the UFCW lost in a bitter strike and lockout 3 1/2 years ago. It also prevented a repeat of the 141-day work stoppage that paralyzed grocery shopping in 2003-04.

Some union members were happy to vote for any contract that would prevent another strike; others welcomed the immediate pay bump and the shortened wait time to qualify for health insurance.

"I voted for it hands down," said Armando Avila, a clerk in the frozen foods section at a Vons in Mission Hills, as he left the voting station at Pickwick Gardens Conference Center. "On our last contract we got beat up pretty bad, and now we're getting some of that back."

In a deal reached Tuesday, the union and negotiators for the markets agreed to shorten to six months the waiting period for health insurance for newer workers and their children.

New hires previously had to wait 12 months to secure insurance for themselves and 30 months for their children. Spouses had their wait time reduced from 30 to 24 months.

That was welcome news to Martha Garcia, who has worked two years in the deli department at a Vons in Pasadena, where she earns \$9.35 an hour.

"I'm happy, because now I can provide health insurance for my husband and two girls," Garcia said.

The contract includes across-the-board wage increases that are retroactive to March 5 and take effect immediately. Experienced food clerks and meat cutters, for example, will receive an additional \$1.65 an hour over four years.

Additionally, the contract merges what are now separate tiered pay scales, putting all employees on the same wage progression schedule, depending on hours worked and job classification.

The new contract greatly improves the situation of about 33,000 "second-tier" employees who were hired after the labor dispute of 2003-04 and receive lower wages and benefits than veteran store employees.

Under the old contract, those in the second tier started at \$7.55 to \$11.05 an hour, with their wages topping out at \$1 to \$3 less per hour than those of the veteran workers. Veteran workers' wages topped out between \$12.17 and \$17.90 an hour.

As approved, the second-tier workers will be eligible to reach the same top pay scale as their veteran counterparts in 7 1/2 years or less, depending on their job classification.

William Padilla, who manages the meat and seafood department at an Albertsons in Burbank, said he has trouble retaining employees because of the two-tiered pay system.

"People work for three months and then quit because it wasn't worth it," he said.

Inside a banquet room at Pickwick Gardens, union organizers wearing yellow T-shirts greeted members as they arrived to vote.

They distributed highlights of the contract, answered individual queries and handed out yellow and blue bracelets, emblazoned with "Stand Strong," the union's slogan.

Icaza, wearing a green dotted tie and blue jacket, was on hand, chalking up the new contract and shaking hands. "Thank you, Mr. Icaza. God bless you," one worker shouted as he walked by.

Bargainers reached the contract after nearly seven months of negotiations during which the union threatened to strike multiple times.

Many union members expressed relief that they wouldn't face another strike like the last one, which cost some workers their homes and marriages.

Flores, the Vons supervisor who voted Sunday with son in tow, said he was happy with the prospect of an immediate 50-cent-an-hour bump in his check.

"Fifty cents an hour may not sound like much, but when you're trying to raise a family in L.A. it makes a difference," he said, as his son squirmed in his arms. "It will help with the cost of baby food and diapers."

---

*richard.verrier@latimes.com*

*jerry.hirsch@latimes.com*